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Review of the efficiency of the administrative and financial functioning of the United Nations

Report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the Office of Internal Oversight Services

Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the inspection of programme and administrative management of the subregional offices of the Economic Commission for Africa

Summary

The subregional offices are a vital part of the Economic Commission for Africa and their role as subregional outposts is very important. Their analyses of subregional economic and social conditions and sectoral and integrational issues contribute to policy deliberations. The subregional offices participate in United Nations development activities in the countries in which they are located and collaborate with some regional economic communities. Nevertheless, their mandate as the operational arms of the Commission, as facilitators of subregional economic cooperation and integration, and as centres for policy dialogue is fulfilled only partially. They are weak in performing their role as facilitators in the subregions of the integration activities of United Nations organizations and agencies. The Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) believes that the mandated core functions of the subregional offices are not supported by adequate resources. The offices' actual role in the overall policy analysis and technical assistance of the Commission is not clear. Their visibility and outreach in the subregions are limited. Exchanges of expertise and best practices between subregional offices are haphazard, and coordination and support from Economic Commission for Africa headquarters are weak. Their support to regional economic communities varies greatly in scope and effectiveness. Those shortcomings notwithstanding, OIOS believes that the impact of the subregional offices could be enhanced through a more focused programming of their activities, the creative dissemination of information emphasizing electronic means and better horizontal and vertical coordination.

* A/60/50 and Corr.1.

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OIOS believes that subregional offices would benefit from aligning their staff expertise and skills more closely with subregional priorities and from consistently maintaining staff strength at budgeted levels. Reliable mechanisms for cooperation and coordination between subregional offices as well as between them and the Commission's headquarters should be put in place and the administrative support to subregional offices should be strengthened. Initiative, flexibility and multidisciplinary teamwork should be promoted and periodic reviews of the programme delivery of subregional offices should become the norm. Most importantly, the operational resources of subregional offices should be strengthened along with their information and communication technology capacity in order to support outreach to all countries in the subregions.

OIOS made 15 recommendations concerning the effectiveness of the programme delivery in the countries of the subregion to strengthen their capacity, improve coordination and collaboration between them and the substantive divisions of the Commission, energize their outreach and enhance their value for United Nations development agencies. OIOS noted with satisfaction the commitment by the management of the Commission to follow up on the recommendations. The comments of management were sought on the draft report and were taken into account in the preparation of the present final report and are reflected in *italics*.

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I. Introduction

1. The promotion of regional integration lies at the heart of the efforts of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) to attain sustainable economic development, in close cooperation with the African Union (AU) and in line with the treaty establishing the African Economic Community. Accordingly, the subregional offices of ECA aim at promoting the harmonization of national policies in support of integration efforts and at consolidating regional economic communities in the overall framework of AU as well as facilitating the attainment of the goals set by the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) in the subregions. The five subregional offices are located in and are responsible for the following subregions: Kigali, East Africa; Lusaka, Southern Africa; Niamey, West Africa; Tangier, Morocco, North Africa; and Yaoundé, Central Africa.

2. In their 40-year history, the subregional offices have gone through four distinct transformations to sharpen their focus on the identification, design and implementation of multinational programmes and projects and to enhance their role in accelerating subregional economic integration. Currently, the core functions of the subregional offices are defined as follows:

(a) Acting as the operational arms of ECA at the country and subregional levels and serving as catalysts to leverage the Commission's resources;

(b) Serving as instruments to ensure harmony between subregional and regional programme orientations and those defined by the strategic directions of the Commission;

(c) Providing advisory services to Member States, regional economic communities and subregional development operators;

(d) Facilitating subregional economic cooperation, integration and development;

(e) Promoting gender issues;

(f) Acting as centres for policy dialogue;

(g) Collecting and disseminating information;

(h) Serving as facilitators of the integration activities of organizations of the United Nations system operating within the subregions.

In addition, pursuant to legislative and executive decisions subregional offices have been entrusted with other key responsibilities in promoting effective networking among Governments, civil society and the private sector on priority development issues; providing assistance for institutional and human capacity-building to ensure the sustainability of programme benefits beyond the implementation period; re-focusing their technical cooperation and outreach programmes with a view to achieving a significant shift towards operational rather than analytical work and making support for implementation of the NEPAD objectives and action plans by regional economic communities in the subregions the key feature of their work.

3. OIOS reviewed the progress and effectiveness of the implementation of all components of the subregional offices' mandate, with a specific focus on coordination, cooperation and partnerships in operational activities and outreach. The inspection utilized three methods: a desk review of relevant legislative,

executive and budgetary documents and other pertinent reports; a survey of 79 staff at ECA and subregional offices, as well as 202 of their partners and stakeholders; and on-site reviews at ECA and subregional offices during which a total of 106 interviews were held with ECA and subregional office staff, Government officials and staff of other United Nations entities, non-governmental organizations and academia.

II. Mandate and governance

A. Subregional offices unable to fulfil the mandate

4. OIOS gleaned that the main problem of the subregional offices was an inability to implement fully all dimensions of their mandates: the activity of subregional offices under each of their defined core functions was far more modest than mandated. Lack of resources limited the activity of subregional offices mainly to their country of residence and restricted their ability to act as the operational arm of ECA throughout the countries of their subregions. Concerning subregional initiatives, the professionals at subregional offices did not always have the priority skills required in different subregions, and they rarely made significant inputs in formulating key country and subregional programmes or actively participated in joint analytical work with partners throughout a subregion. OIOS noted that currently subregional offices have insufficient capacity to provide the framework either for knowledge sharing between Member States in their subregions or disseminating best practices between different subregions and regional economic communities.

5. OIOS was also concerned with the lack of clarity regarding the balance between operational and analytical activities at subregional offices. The current policy aims at achieving a significant shift towards operational rather than analytical work but there has been no change in the traditional analytical outputs of subregional offices, and their technical cooperation resources are currently at an even lower level than was previously the case. OIOS noted that the envisaged shift of regular budget resources under advisory services, as well as travel of staff, to subregional offices in the 2006-2007 programme budget is aimed at remedying the shortfall. In their role as centres for policy dialogue subregional offices achieved only limited impact as the intergovernmental committees of experts were not always viable instruments for fostering such dialogue.

6. The impact of subregional offices was barely discernible in their role as facilitators of the integration activities of organizations of the United Nations system in the subregions. The two main reasons for that are, firstly, the budgeted and actual resources of subregional offices are grossly insufficient to enable full implementation of their core functions, and secondly, ECA headquarters provides them very little support as a resource multiplier.

7. In every country in Africa and in the subregions there is currently a vast network of United Nations organizations and agencies and non-governmental organizations that are engaged in various activities with regional economic communities, civil society and academia. OIOS strongly believes that ECA needs to review the overall landscape of those activities and come up with a clear understanding of what value subregional offices could contribute as partners in the

processes. It is necessary to aim at close correlation between the priority expertise that each subregion requires and the skills profile of each subregional office. The role of the offices as centres for policy dialogue should be clearly fleshed out, including the definition of their target audiences and means of assessing their impact.

B. The impact of intergovernmental committees of experts is limited

8. The intergovernmental committees of experts are mandated to oversee the overall formulation and implementation of the programmes of work of subregional offices with a focus on subregional economic and social priorities and the promotion of subregional economic cooperation and integration. They should serve as the main venue for policy dialogue and for providing guidance from Member States, regional economic communities and other developmental stakeholders to bring the work of subregional offices into line with new challenges and concerns in the subregion. Currently, however, while the economic and social situation of the subregion is discussed and recommendations related to it are issued, not enough emphasis is made on improving the planning and performance assessment of subregional offices. Consultations on specific requests for subregional office services or discussions of the joint projects of subregional offices and other United Nations agencies rarely appear on the agenda and there is practically no follow-up reporting on the implementation of recommendations of previous meetings of intergovernmental committees of experts.

9. OIOS observed that in the discussions of intergovernmental committees of experts the delegates raised a number of specific, concrete issues calling for further analysis. Subregional offices may consider supplementing their conventional outputs, in cooperation with ECA headquarters and/or other United Nations agencies, with more occasional papers and reports dedicated to the specific concerns of delegates to those committees. Such products may research more proactively various developmental and integration policies and different scenarios of their impact.

10. Currently, the distribution by subregional offices of their products varies widely in the different subregions. In some of them it is limited to the delegates to the intergovernmental committees of experts. OIOS believes that such distribution should be drastically expanded, first by soliciting, both through delegates and independently, much broader national and subregional mailing lists of relevant addressees and, second, by a changeover, whenever possible, to the e-mailing of electronic copies of subregional office products instead of the distribution of hard copies.

11. OIOS noted that the intergovernmental committees of experts mainly comprised the middle level of national management and thus the outcomes of their deliberations were not guaranteed to reach appropriate national and subregional political levels even when they contained pertinent recommendations. The underlying reason is that subregional offices neither control nor know how the delegates to intergovernmental committees of experts dispose of the reports of such committees. OIOS believes that to enhance the impact of the committees ECA should consider disseminating the executive summaries of those reports to appropriate political leaders and executive heads at the national and subregional

levels and to regional economic communities and the United Nations organizations in the subregion.

12. OIOS observed that there is no continuous and reliable interaction among subregional offices on the one hand and national offices and regional economic communities on the other in the intervals between meetings of intergovernmental committees of experts, nor any continuous networking with United Nations agencies in subregions. Furthermore, the reports of subregional offices are often provided as hard copies to delegates to intergovernmental committees of experts as they arrive for the meeting, depriving them of sufficient time to study them and conduct an informed discussion. In the opinion of OIOS, employing the Internet, to the extent possible, to create an electronic platform would unite the community of stakeholders and practitioners in the subregion, allowing them to submit thematic proposals to subregional offices in advance of formal meetings of intergovernmental committees of experts, and to comment on reports and to discuss the seminal points and the merits of the national and subregional development themes they contain. Such electronic space could assume different architectures, for example discussion forums, or platforms containing progress reports on the implementation of the recommendations of intergovernmental committees of experts; updates on ECA initiatives and feedback on them from the subregions, or a database of national and subregional experts with their profiles. While OIOS recognizes that implementing such tools would require the strengthening and re-profiling of the staff resources of subregional offices, a considerable economy of scale could be achieved if the effort were backstopped by ECA headquarters.

III. Programme management

13. The programmatic strategy of ECA is five-pronged, comprising policy analysis and advocacy; enhanced partnerships; technical assistance; communication and knowledge-sharing and support for subregional activities. The organization of ECA into six substantive divisions is appropriate for that strategy and the five subregional offices provide an indispensable means for engaging ECA throughout the continent. However, the overall effectiveness of the set-up is contingent on management advancing cohesion and synergy between the substantive divisions and subregional offices and providing guidance and support to the offices in fulfilling their core functions along with a reliable mechanism for collaboration among subregional offices.

14. OIOS commends ECA for its progress towards harmonizing the medium-term programmes of substantive divisions and subregional offices through their joint reviews of the 2006-2007 strategic framework. However, OIOS also observed that ongoing guidance and support from ECA headquarters to subregional offices was insufficient and that the role of the offices in major ECA initiatives was vague. In the view of OIOS, the latter is caused largely by the lack of a common understanding of the operational role of subregional offices, and by the disbanding of the Coordination Unit at ECA headquarters, while the former is a result of the relevant policy documents not addressing explicitly the subregional offices' role. OIOS noted the effort to clarify and operationalize the role of the offices in the 2006-2007 programming cycle and will review its impact as it follows up on the present report.

A. Programme planning and monitoring is not subregional office-specific

15. The work programmes of all five subregional offices are combined into one of eight subprogrammes of the ECA biennial budget. The logical framework is formulated in generic terms for all five subregional offices. However, since each subregion faces different social and developmental challenges, the work programmes of the subregional offices should also be different. OIOS is of the view that by developing a separate subprogramme for each subregion ECA will be able to focus better relevant expertise and resources on the respective subregional priorities.

16. OIOS believes that there should be linkages not only between the work programmes of different subregional offices but also between them and all other ECA subprogrammes. Currently, that is not the case. *In that regard, ECA management stated that interdivisional synergies are built at the level of strategies for implementation as defined in the 2006-2007 work plans.*[1] Consequently, there is little incentive for subregional offices to exchange their best practices, and monitoring and reporting on subregional office programme performance is neither comprehensive nor regular. The reporting on the implementation of outputs is weak, data on the relevant indicators of achievement are not properly collected and progress made on the results achieved is not assessed. Programme performance information is not used by either subregional offices or ECA for other reports and assessments. Apart from the list of outputs, the reports of intergovernmental committees of experts do not contain meaningful results-based information on the performance of relevant subregional offices. There is not yet a culture of consistent monitoring of programme performance through the Integrated Monitoring and Documentation Information System.

17. OIOS noted that its recommendation on making the format of subregional offices and divisional programme implementation plans (used for executive monitoring) compatible with the format of programme performance reports was implemented. However, just as the format of those reports has recently evolved, so should the format of the plans. It is necessary to go beyond the mere reporting on outputs, to expand programme implementation plans to cover the progress in implementing expected accomplishments and to employ the Integrated Monitoring and Documentation Information System actively for the preparation of programme implementation plans by subregional offices.

B. Coordination is weak

18. The problem of coordination between subregional offices and ECA headquarters persists. In response to an OIOS recommendation, the Coordination Unit at ECA headquarters was established to address the issue. OIOS gleaned that the Coordination Unit has proven its worth by providing the Deputy Executive Secretary of ECA with staff support in her broad oversight of subregional offices and in acting as an efficient agent for liaison and broker between the offices and ECA headquarters in diverse programmatic and administrative areas. At the beginning of 2003, OIOS endorsed the Coordination Unit's initiatives and its recommendations to strengthen the role of subregional offices within ECA and encouraged the Coordination Unit to follow through with its plans to establish a

[1] Management comments are in italics.

web-based system for the exchange of information between the offices. OIOS advised ECA management to implement the Coordination Unit's recommendations and it decided to do so by January 2004. At the time of inspection OIOS, regrettably, was not able to obtain at ECA headquarters any record of action to follow them up.

19. OIOS believes that this disruption and loss of institutional memory was caused by a lack of proper handover during the absorption of the Coordination Unit's functions by the Office of Policy and Programme Coordination. OIOS was not able to ascertain where exactly the responsibilities of the former Coordination Unit are located within that Office and observed that most were in fact defunct. The absence of a dedicated institutional mechanism to facilitate the coordination of activities between ECA headquarters and subregional offices creates an environment of uncertainty and conflicting expectations. OIOS is not convinced that placing the Coordination Unit's functions within the Office of Policy and Programme Coordination has been the best solution. The primary focus of the Office of Policy and Programme Coordination, according to its statement of objectives, is the enhancement of programme planning and development; the implementation of special programmes; monitoring and evaluation; and communication and knowledge management. That is important work in itself and quite different from the backstopping work entailed in the coordination of the activities of subregional offices.

20. OIOS explored different ideas on how to improve collaboration and synergies between subregional offices and ECA headquarters. They included, on the one hand, the creation of web-based tools and electronic bulletin boards as the main instrument of coordination and, on the other hand, the reinstatement of the Coordination Unit at ECA headquarters and the implementation of its recommendations. OIOS leaves it to ECA to decide what is the best solution — either to revert to a tried system where the coordination function is vested in the Coordination Unit or to pursue the web-based virtual coordination arrangement. The important point is to establish without delay a strong and reliable coordination mechanism between the subregional offices and ECA headquarters as well as between the offices themselves.

21. Such a mechanism should also foster the continuous and effective involvement of subregional offices in major ECA initiatives. OIOS noted that despite the statutory role of the subregional offices as the operational arms of ECA, seminal ECA initiatives rarely addressed their role in concrete terms, even when the issues of regional collaboration were dealt with. Similarly, subregional offices were rarely closely involved in important analyses of regional integration undertaken by ECA headquarters. One of the revitalized coordination mechanism's central tasks should be to promote participation by subregional offices in all relevant ECA initiatives and activities. Programme consultations should not be only between a particular subregional office and ECA headquarters but also should involve all other offices to create synergies between subregions; such consultations should not be limited only to specific projects but also should include input by subregional offices into major events and issues on Africa's development agenda.

C. Regional advisers do not work closely with subregional offices

22. The current deployment of the regional advisers to substantive divisions was aimed at enhancing their effectiveness. However, OIOS received mixed reviews from the subregional offices on the impact of regional advisers in the subregions. The subregional offices were concerned by weaknesses in coordination and by the insufficient correlation between the services of regional advisers and their own needs and those of regional economic communities. Some subregional offices had not benefited from the services of regional advisers in recent years and were uncertain about their relevance. Subregional offices believed that regional advisers who deal with the priorities of specific subregions should be stationed with the relevant offices rather than at ECA headquarters. OIOS shares that view.

23. OIOS observed that there was little documentary evidence to judge the impact of the services of regional advisers on subregions. The current format and content of the mission reports of regional advisers do not allow for an assessment of whether mission objectives are being achieved and do not provide any practical follow-up suggestions on improving the work of the advisers. OIOS is of the view that the missions of regional advisers should be closely linked to subregional needs and should involve the relevant subregional offices.

D. Mission reports are not used effectively

24. OIOS believes that one of the crucial problems of subregional offices and ECA as a whole is follow-up and implementation. Many good ideas, initiatives and proposals for improvement are designed, planned and launched, but there is no consistent implementation and follow-up. The mission reports system at the Office of Policy and Programme Coordination is an example. While a mechanism exists for monitoring and reporting on the missions of the regional advisers and staff of substantive divisions and subregional offices, it is not easily accessible and is managed centrally mostly through hard copies. The Office of Policy and Programme Coordination had developed a web-based system with the potential to foster exchange of good practices and knowledge as well as to serve as a clearing house for mission reporting. However, currently in its unstructured and outdated state, it has no value for ECA or the subregional offices. With the proper configuration, clear guidelines and procedures on its use, a search engine and other facilities, it could become a powerful resource for sharing information between subregional offices and with ECA. The similar system at the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) should be considered for emulation.

IV. Operational activities

25. To fulfil their function as the operational arms of ECA at the subregional and country levels subregional offices are supposed to achieve a pronounced shift towards technical cooperation and away from analytical work. OIOS found little evidence of that.

A. Subregional offices are not yet the operational arms of ECA

26. Contrary to their core function, subregional offices accounted for 22 per cent of all ECA technical cooperation outputs delivered with both regular budget and extrabudgetary resources during the last two bienniums. Although their share increased from 19 per cent in 2002-2003 to 26 per cent in 2004-2005, that level is still considerably below what would qualify them as "operational arms", which implies entities responsible for the bulk of technical cooperation activities. OIOS noted that while the subregional offices are supposed to be at the forefront of ECA subregional operations, few of the outputs delivered by ECA headquarters were coordinated with them and implemented with their participation. OIOS believes that the situation needs to be reversed to make the subregional offices the primary vehicle of technical assistance and to enhance their credibility and visibility in the subregions.

27. OIOS noted with concern the low priority given to subregional offices in the distribution of ECA extrabudgetary resources. Data from the Technical Cooperation Trust Fund indicate that out of the approximately $17 million United States dollars ($) in extrabudgetary funds available in 2002-2003, only 5 per cent were provided to the subregional offices. Much larger shares were allotted to ECA headquarters substantive divisions and the office of the Executive Secretary. Regrettably, the situation in 2004 deteriorated as subregional offices accounted only for 2.1 per cent of the total of about $10 million in extrabudgetary resources.

B. Extrabudgetary funds are not strategically allocated

28. In the view of OIOS, given the far-reaching operational mandate of subregional offices, their share of extrabudgetary resources should be at least comparable to their share of 25 per cent of regular budget resources. That would allow them to establish proper visibility in countries which previously they could not reach, bringing them closer to becoming the real operational arms of ECA. There are two aspects to the issue: regularizing the process of the allocation of extrabudgetary funds and allowing subregional offices to raise them.

29. Concerning the allocation of funds, OIOS observed that neither a standing advisory body for this purpose nor a formal process for collecting, assessing and approving requests for extrabudgetary funds existed at ECA. The executive decisions on that matter were not transparent and not made in a participatory manner. The established practices throughout the Organization underscore the vital importance of transparent peer reviews, based on well-known and accepted criteria, of requests for extrabudgetary funding. It is time for ECA to implement those practices.

30. Concerning fund-raising, OIOS observed that it is handled solely by ECA headquarters. While OIOS appreciated the energetic and flexible manner in which such funds are raised, it believes that the process could only benefit from allowing subregional offices to complement it by raising funds on their own. Subregional offices are well positioned to leverage their status as subregional entities as a comparative advantage in resource mobilization. Their fund-raising should be geared to the priority needs of the respective subregions, steered by central guidelines and supported by the necessary training.

31. While an emphasis on operational activity implies adequate resources, it can only be achieved with relevant professional expertise and skills that would allow each subregional office to become a centre of excellence for the specific developmental concerns of the subregion. OIOS observed, however, that currently the actual staffing of offices, both in terms of quantity and expertise, is inadequate for the desired operational impact.

32. The strength of the subregional offices is at the level of 21 per cent of all ECA professional staff or 14 per cent of all ECA staff, including General Service. The current 14 per cent is well below the target of 25-30 per cent of all staff that the Commission envisaged. That means that the budgeted strength of subregional offices is at least 20 per cent below the target, a significant shortfall. The shortfall is exacerbated by the high level of lengthy vacancies — ranging from 20 per cent to 60 per cent — which affected the subregional offices more acutely than ECA headquarters. The utilization of the vacant subregional office posts by ECA headquarters on a temporary basis only aggravates the situation by delaying the strengthening of subregional offices. OIOS strongly believes that the short-term use of their vacant posts should be the exclusive prerogative of subregional offices and ECA headquarters should provide effective support in filling subregional office vacancies expeditiously. OIOS noted that while the staffing tables of all subregional offices were identical, their workload, in terms of geographical and substantive coverage, differed significantly. That difference should be reflected in the future strengthening of the subregional offices.

33. Concerning quality — expertise and skills of professional staff — OIOS observed that in most of the subregional offices there was a mismatch between the expertise available and the actual development priorities of the respective subregions. Ideally, an organization's skills composition should be constantly reviewed as new challenges emerge and different strategies are developed to tackle those challenges. Moreover, there is a dearth of staff with solid operational expertise, and there is no training programme in place to remedy the situation. OIOS also noted that there is a mobility policy which supposedly guides the deployment of staff with a view to enhancing their field exposure. However, in practice it does not appear to be functional, as most subregional office staff professed no knowledge of it. OIOS believes that the issues of skills alignment among subregional office staff and the promotion of their operational expertise require immediate attention.

V. Collaboration and partnerships

34. Collaboration and partnership are the centrepiece of United Nations reform, and they are vital for subregional offices in their role as ECA outposts and facilitators of the subregional integration activities of the United Nations system. OIOS looked at two main dimensions: collaboration with United Nations developmental actors and with national and subregional stakeholders. Considerable room for improvement exists in both dimensions.

A. Collaboration with United Nations agencies is limited

35. OIOS observed subregional offices collaborating almost exclusively with United Nations entities in their host countries as partners in United Nations country

teams within the framework of the common country assessment and the United Nations Development Assistance Framework. Subregional offices were mostly inactive in the other countries of their subregions owing to the lack of resources to ensure country-level representation and participation in United Nations country teams. That caused them to lack visibility in most countries that they are supposed to serve, which was underscored by an almost total lack of knowledge about subregional offices among United Nations representatives in countries other than the host countries of such offices.

36. OIOS believes that within the existing paradigm subregional offices lack the resources either to generate an awareness of their competencies among the other United Nations agencies or to operationalize such specific competencies. That regrettable situation calls for a rethinking of ways and means to make the mandate of the offices in the subregions meaningful and actionable and to establish them as valuable developmental partners. The status quo contrasts sharply with high-level policy statements. OIOS recalls that in the report of the Executive Secretaries of the Regional Commissions it was noted that the main challenge facing the United Nations in Africa was how to bring about enhanced coherence and coordination in its operations at all levels and that the expertise of ECA in cross-border and subregional issues, some of which could not be effectively addressed solely through country-level coordination, placed ECA in a good position to coordinate and lead the process of integrating the subregional dimension of United Nations activities.

37. One possible solution, in the view of OIOS, is to initiate a broad discussion with the offices in Africa of United Nations agencies, including the Regional Bureau for Africa of the United Nations Development Programme, with a view to defining the value added that they expect from subregional offices. Ideas to consider include creating subregional networks of economists and other specialists to collaborate in analyses of subregional economic, social and integrational issues; serving as clearing houses of comprehensive, multifaceted socio-economic data and information on subregions supported by and accessible to all partners; hosting a subregional database of United Nations experts in a wide range of developmental expertise relevant to a subregion; and facilitating subregional exchange of best practices in developmental assistance, in particular regarding assistance to NEPAD.

38. Achieving those goals would require different work methods. Currently, with the exclusive reliance on physical contact and the distribution of paper documents and given the extreme scarcity of the subregional offices' financial resources, that ambition does not appear realistic. However, if the subregional offices manage to switch over from physical to virtual, electronic means of collaboration, the goals could be attained. That would require, of course, a major infusion of expertise and solid support by ECA headquarters in creating a number of appropriate web-based, interactive systems run by subregional offices and providing value to all United Nations practitioners in the subregion. OIOS sees it as the only practical way ahead.

39. Fostering the subregional offices' role calls for a change in the attitude of ECA headquarters towards them. Currently, subregional offices are given little attention in analytical and policy documents emanating from ECA headquarters although their substance in most cases impinges directly on subregional office mandates. OIOS noted very scant reference to the role of subregional offices in the various events, news and publication notes issued through the website. No document, event or presentation makes a reference to the participation of subregional offices while

addressing such important problems affecting Africa as integration, water, sustainable development, energy or information technology in which they are supposed to play a significant role.

B. Support to regional economic communities in implementing the New Partnership for Africa's Development has to be revitalized

40. Such support is defined as the key feature of the subregional offices' work. OIOS observed, however, that the intensity and effectiveness of subregional office support varied considerably between offices and in regard to different regional economic communities. The degree of subregional office involvement with the communities ranged from rather substantive and continuous, based on a mutually agreed thematic understanding, through spotty, not very structured and ad hoc, to none at all. OIOS is aware that with their limited resources and given the varying mandates of different regional economic communities, subregional offices are not able to engage all of them in a thorough and effective manner. Nevertheless, achieving sufficient clarity on the needs of each regional economic community and on the division of labour with the NEPAD secretariat is essential to the definition of practical action plans for subregional office support to the regional economic communities in implementing NEPAD. Thereafter, the scope of support that ECA headquarters would provide to subregional offices in that function will have to be decided.

VI. Communication and outreach

41. OIOS observed that the subregional offices currently lack a sound communication and outreach strategy, particularly in regard to countries beyond their hosts where their visibility is poor. One of the main reasons for that is the lack of specialized communication expertise and weakness of the information and communication technology support to their outreach activities.

A. Communication and outreach strategies are not effective

42. OIOS believes that the development of an effective subregional office communication strategy is hampered by the top-heavy approach to communication by ECA headquarters. One example of that is the fact that there is a Communication Team comprised of seven communication officers at ECA headquarters, while the subregional offices have none. It is clear to OIOS that to develop a meaningful outreach strategy and credible visibility in the subregions, the subregional offices have to be provided with adequate capacity. It is equally important that a common outreach strategy be developed jointly by ECA headquarters and the subregional offices and then customized to specific subregional needs by communication officers redeployed to each subregional office. OIOS believes that the redeployment of communication officers would be in line with the strategic commitment to decentralize 25 per cent of ECA staff into the subregions. Close cooperation with United Nations Information Centres in the subregions is essential to the success of the exercise. One promising approach could be the creation of advisory task forces on public information and outreach in the subregions, led by subregional offices,

backstopped by ECA and including representatives of local media and civil society. The desirable outcome of their work would be actionable plans to drastically enhance the scope, timeliness and effectiveness of the subregional offices' outreach.

B. Information and communication technology resources are vital for effective outreach

43. While ECA identified about a year ago the need to enhance its outreach to various target audiences with an emphasis on electronic means, there is no follow-up action plan specifically defining the subregional offices' role in the new vision. OIOS observed that the absence of an ECA-wide, real-time, web-based communications platform drastically impairs the subregional outreach of the subregional offices, thereby compromising the overall impact of ECA. Each subregional office has a page on the ECA website. While the quality of the pages varies, their common flaws are a lack of useful information or statistics either on subregions or on countries and of any links to the websites of other key partners and stakeholders in their subregions and any search engines. The information on the pages is mostly obsolete. It is obvious that the subregional offices (and ECA, by extension) have yet to master the Internet as a modern outreach tool.

44. Those drawbacks should be addressed without delay. The new websites should be created as an interactive online platform that would be an open but structured space for various communities of practitioners, experts and non-expert audiences to provide feedback to subregional offices and to share their concerns and experiences. There should be a dedicated space for issues of regional integration and the way ahead for regional economic communities. Such websites should raise the visibility of the offices in their subregions, inspire policy discussions and action and forge links concerning the ECA agenda between decision makers, experts and civil society in each subregion and between the subregional offices. That would foster partnerships of subregional offices with various national and subregional organizations and allow key policy messages to be spread much more rapidly and effectively. The new websites should provide the maximum wealth of pertinent information such as the economic and social surveys of subregions, country profiles and regional economic community profiles as well as current links to the variety of other institutions in a subregion. They must have contact databases for stakeholders and electronic distribution lists, and a feedback facility. Once under way, a network of ECA information and communication technology experts both at headquarters and at subregional offices should be constantly at work implementing new approaches and technologies on subregional office websites. Only then would subregional offices be able finally to reach the twenty-first century level of outreach and communications.

C. Knowledge management must be taken seriously

45. The strategy of ECA emphasizes its role as a hub of knowledge and excellence for Africa's development. Accordingly, channelling knowledge is defined as one of the important subregional office functions. In practice, OIOS was not able to observe any tangible knowledge management activities. OIOS believes that to achieve a meaningful role in knowledge management related to subregions,

subregional offices, jointly with ECA headquarters, have to form a sound understanding of the overall environment in that area to determine their comparative advantage and draw a realistic plan of action to maximize their corresponding value to subregions.

46. OIOS sees that as a serious challenge. There are a huge number of networks on the Internet organized by region, practice area and various other criteria. In the United Nations system alone every agency hosts at least one knowledge network, although many actually host several, which are administered by either a department or a division. Most of them deal extensively with issues of African development and are therefore pertinent to the subregional offices' mandate. In addition, an OIOS Internet search identified at least 10 major knowledge networks relevant to Africa and at least 8 others specifically focused on Africa. Along with knowledge management networks there are numerous websites that have highly detailed information on African countries. All of them are quite detailed and structured under numerous topics including, for example, geography, government, politics, the economy, industrial sectors, investment, trade, business, travel, communication and infrastructure, risk, transnational issues, population and statistics. Furthermore, OIOS found at least a dozen websites that provide comprehensive statistics on African countries that could be used by subregional offices to develop country profiles in their subregions.

47. That ocean of sources of information makes it very time-consuming and unproductive for an average African user (institutional or individual expert) to subscribe to or otherwise use all of them. The valuable help that subregional offices can provide is by acting as a filter and channel in facilitating access by their Member States, regional economic communities and other stakeholders to the most relevant communities of knowledge networks that address the priority areas in their regions and to databases with information relevant to subregions. Subregional offices should strive to become, in effect, a one-stop centre in their respective subregions for knowledge networking by hosting a specific selection of knowledge networks and databases.

VII. Administration and management

A. Management, administrative and personnel practices are not sufficiently robust

48. OIOS noted the good general oversight practice of subregional offices and periodic on-site reviews of their activities by the Deputy Executive Secretary of the Commission. Such good practice should be built on and expanded. Subregional office directors should participate as a matter of course in the meetings of the senior management team through teleconferencing. Communication between ECA headquarters and the subregional offices should include an analysis of major events and initiatives and issues relating to the development agenda for Africa. In turn, subregional offices should provide (at least once a year) systematic briefings on their respective subregions that go beyond just reporting on annual activities. ECA top management, the Office of Policy and Programme Coordination and subregional offices should meet at least once a year to discuss both substantive (with the relevant ECA divisions) and administrative (with the Human Resources

Management and Finance Division and the Conference and General Services Division) issues. ECA headquarters should establish an exchange mechanism with the subregional offices that would allow for a regular monitoring of their work and a systematic evaluation of their performance; an exchange of views and the provision of input on ECA major events and issues; and feedback and assessment from the subregional offices.

49. OIOS noted two concerns in the administrative area: a haphazard handling of subregional office vacancies (mentioned above) and an insufficient delegation of authority on mundane administrative matters. OIOS believes that subregional offices must be given the lead in determining the skills profiles of new vacancies and that temporary appointments during vacancies should be made only by subregional offices for service with them. The administrative and financial delegation of authority to subregional offices should be reviewed to make it more effective. However, such delegation should be expanded on a case-by-case basis and not until and unless it is ascertained by ECA headquarters that the relevant subregional office has adequate expertise and skills to handle it. There should be periodic reviews of how such delegation is exercised.

B. Evaluation is not consistent and ongoing

50. While one of the main current ECA commitments was to strengthen evaluation, OIOS observed that evaluation and self-evaluation activities at subregional offices remain weak. Attempts were made to identify the issues of concern and reflect on improvements necessary, but they rarely led to plans of action and follow-up. Evaluations of particular outputs and projects are done from time to time but they vary in quality and peer reviews are sporadic. OIOS found only one reliable survey dealing with the subregional offices' needs and performance. Feedback from stakeholders on the work of the subregional offices and their impact was only occasionally obtained. To serve any useful purpose, evaluations should be done on a regular basis and follow common norms and standards.

C. Staff training needs improvement

51. OIOS noted the concern of staff at subregional offices regarding insufficient training opportunities, especially when compared with ECA headquarters. Some training requests submitted to ECA headquarters did not receive a response, and it was not clear to OIOS whether mechanisms existed for the prioritization and equitable distribution of training funds between the subregional offices. OIOS was concerned about the lack of training plans for 2004. OIOS observed a prevalence of ad hoc requests for training made without clarity regarding available funds and without any analysis of training priorities. At the same time there were instances of a lack of response from some subregional offices to training offers and a lack of monitoring and follow-up on training undertaken by the subregional offices.

52. OIOS also noted that the substantive upgrading of skills was not given enough importance and staff training was rarely discussed and prioritized in connection with individual performance. OIOS was further concerned about the lack of uniformity in costing and the lack of efficiency considerations in selecting and implementing the

approved training for 2005. Priorities, opportunities, budget allocations and responsibilities were not transparent and not communicated sufficiently in advance. OIOS is of the view that undertaking group training at subregional offices, rather than relying on individual training at ECA headquarters, especially regarding information and communication technologies and the enhancement of substantive skills, could be more cost-effective. Economies of scale should be taken advantage of in arranging training in conjunction with services provided by regional advisers or consultants to enhance and diversify the skills of subregional office staff. Joint training with United Nations agencies in the subregion should be used more often.

D. The Subregional Office in North Africa must be moved to Rabat as soon as possible

53. OIOS noted with concern the current location of the Subregional Office in North Africa in Tangier, Morocco, which inhibits its meaningful participation in the United Nations country team and results in considerable wasteful expense, along with the current substandard security and working conditions in which it has to operate. At the same time, OIOS noted with appreciation the commitment of the Government of Morocco to resolve the situation in the nearest future.

VIII. Conclusions

54. The strategic objective and core functions of subregional offices are as relevant today as ever. However, OIOS has no doubt that the subregional offices are not able to implement fully their mandate with the current set-up and resources. Their resources must be increased. However, that increase should not be just quantitative — resource growth should be drastically different in nature. Subregional offices need skills that are geared to the specific requirements of their respective subregions, and they need operational expertise. They need specialist expertise to establish a wide visibility in the subregions and to develop and maintain effective outreach and communications. Most of all, they need an increased inflow of information and communication technology resources to support the presence of the subregional offices on the national level and their meaningful engagement with the wide range of stakeholders, and to ensure that they are effective collectors and disseminators of information relevant to the subregions.

55. The next most important challenge is to create a comprehensive, inclusive and dynamic system of coordination and cooperation between subregional offices; between each subregional office and United Nations agencies and other developmental partners with national stakeholders in the countries of the region; and with regional economic communities. A further challenge would be to prove convincingly to all concerned the unique value of subregional offices. Again, it is only through a major input of information and communication technology resources that OIOS envisions the challenge being tackled.

IX. Recommendations

56. In order to strengthen the role of intergovernmental committees of experts, subregional offices should undertake a joint initiative, supported by ECA

headquarters, creating an electronic space to facilitate networking with delegates and wider audiences of stakeholders and practitioners, to expand the electronic distribution of their products and ensure that the outcomes of meetings of intergovernmental committees of experts reach senior political and executive levels nationally and subregionally (paragraphs 8-12) (SP-04-002-001).

57. ECA should develop a separate subprogramme of work for each subregional office in its biennial budgets, so that expected accomplishment and all other elements of the logical framework should be specific to a subregional office. ECA should develop a plan that would provide guidance and training to subregional offices on results-based management and the use of the Integrated Monitoring and Documentation Information System for programme performance monitoring and reporting (paragraphs 13-17) (SP-04-002-002).

58. Guidelines defining coordination mechanisms regarding subregional offices and ECA headquarters should be officially issued. The Executive Secretary of ECA should take immediate measures to revitalize the functions of the former Coordination Unit at the Commission's headquarters as well as to clarify and re-energize the supervision and coordination arrangements regarding subregional offices. Relevant information and communication technology tools such as bulletin boards and discussion forums should be developed to enhance such coordination arrangements. The previous recommendations of the Coordination Unit should be fully implemented without delay (paragraphs 18-21) (SP-04-002-003).

ECA management stated that since the appointment of the Acting Deputy Executive Secretary, arrangements have been made to re-establish the operational activities of the Coordination Unit under the Office of the Deputy Executive Secretary.

59. ECA should conduct an overall review of the function of regional advisers to ensure that their expertise and deployment are in accord with the needs of member States and subregional offices. ECA headquarters, jointly with subregional offices, should establish a mechanism for monitoring the results of the missions of regional advisers, and for sharing lessons learned and best practices identified by regional advisers (paragraphs 22-23) (SP-04-002-004).

ECA management stated that the guidelines for regional advisory services have recently been reviewed and are beginning to be implemented. A further review of coordination aspects, within the realm of the technical cooperation programme of ECA, is being undertaken. A review of the management and administration of mission travel has been completed, and ECA is currently exploring the technical feasibility of implementing a computer-based mission reporting system based on the ECLAC model.

OIOS noted the measures and will review their impact in the course of following up on the present report.

60. The mission reporting system should be modernized to become an effective tool for information and knowledge sharing. It should be equipped with a search engine and facilities for producing summary and thematic reports. Guidelines on its use should be issued by the Office of Policy and Programme Coordination and adherence to them strictly monitored (paragraph 24) (SP-04-002-005).

ECA management stated that the recommendation is being implemented.

OIOS noted the fact and will review its implementation in the course of following up on the present report.

61. The Executive Secretary should, without delay:

(a) Establish an advisory committee for the allocation of extrabudgetary resources on which subregional offices should be represented. Its terms of reference should provide transparent arrangements and procedures for requesting, prioritizing, reviewing, allocating, monitoring, reporting and evaluating the use of extrabudgetary funds. The committee should see to it that subregional offices should be allocated no less than a quarter of the total extrabudgetary funds of ECA;

(b) Develop guidelines for subregional office fund-raising in the subregions and encourage them to undertake it in close consultation with ECA headquarters;

(c) Strengthen the operational capacity of subregional offices (paragraphs 28-30) (SP-04-002-006).

62. The Executive Secretary of ECA should prepare a realistic plan of action aimed at further strengthening subregional office staffing and aligning staff skills profiles and operational expertise with the specific needs of the subregions. Mobility arrangements should be part of such a plan. A periodic assessment of the needs and workload of the different subregions must be carried out as a matter of course and followed up by appropriate executive action (paragraphs 31-33) (SP-04-002-007).

63. OIOS recommends the following:

(a) In order to strengthen collaboration with its United Nations partners, ECA headquarters jointly with the subregional offices should develop a new approach to facilitating the integration activities of the organizations of the United Nations system in subregions based on the various information and communication technology instruments allowing electronic space for discussions and coordination. One example of such an undertaking could be to advocate and establish a regional protocol whereby all United Nations organizations agree to use a common statistical database administered by the subregional office for developing programmes and evaluating progress on the Millennium Development Goals in the subregion;

(b) ECA headquarters should define and publicize as a matter of course the meaningful and actionable role of subregional offices in all its major initiatives (paragraphs 35-39) (SP-04-002-008).

64. Subregional offices should analyse the needs of the secretariats of regional economic communities for support in implementing NEPAD, define the ECA headquarters support that they can rely on in that regard and reach a clear understanding on the division of labour with the NEPAD secretariat. Based on that, subregional offices should develop practical medium-term plans of action in providing support to regional economic communities (paragraph 40) (SP-04-002-009).

65. ECA should, without delay, take the following steps:

(a) Subregional offices and ECA headquarters should jointly develop a coherent and realistic outreach and communication strategy for subregions, including a clear understanding of the target audience for outputs and services and the most efficient and effective electronic means for disseminating information and

for obtaining and analysing feedback from users. The stakeholders should take part in the development of the strategy;

(b) Communication officers should be redeployed to the subregional offices to strengthen their outreach capacity. They should be in charge of fine tuning and implementing the communication strategy of each subregional office, in close collaboration with other United Nations offices in the subregion. ECA should provide adequate extrabudgetary funding to implement the strategy;

(c) Subregional offices' websites should be radically redesigned to host comprehensive and current political, economic and social information on the subregion originating from ECA, other United Nations agencies, member States, intergovernmental organizations and regional economic communities with a view to positioning subregional offices as the leading sources of essential subregional data and information and making them active participants in United Nations country teams without necessarily having a physical presence in every country. The design of the websites should allow them to serve as the one-stop access to diverse and comprehensive information on subregions. Other information and communication technology tools such as bulletin boards and discussion forums and databases of stakeholders and partners should be expeditiously developed with the support of ECA headquarters to improve subregional offices' networking and outreach capacity (paragraphs 41-47) (SP-04-002-010).

66. ECA headquarters should review, jointly with subregional offices, managerial oversight of and administrative support to them in line with the suggestions in paragraphs 48-49 above and implement them shortly (paragraphs 48-49) (SP-04-002-011).

67. ECA headquarters should develop a plan of evaluation and self-evaluation of the work of subregional offices and consistently implement it. Periodic and comprehensive surveys of stakeholders should be conducted. Training in methods of evaluation and self-evaluation should be arranged by the Office of Policy and Programme Coordination (paragraph 50) (SP-04-002-012).

68. ECA should establish a transparent, participatory and equitable mechanism for providing training to subregional offices. It should include a core catalogue of training opportunities and the optimal decentralization of training funds and reflect subregional priorities. Basic elements of training management such as annual plans, appraisal of training received and keeping staff training records must be put in place. Group training, distance electronic training and joint training with other United Nations entities should be encouraged (paragraphs 51-52) (SP-04-002-013).

69. Based on the commitment of the Government of Morocco, the Subregional Office in North Africa should take proactive practical measures to relocate to Rabat by the end of 2005 (paragraph 53) (SP-04-002-014).

(*Signed*) Barbara **Dixon**
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